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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 12 of General Assembly resolution 50/88 B of 19 December 1995, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it every three months during its fiftieth session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan.

II. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

2. The United Nations Special Mission resumed its activities on 12 January 1996 when the Head of the Mission, Mr. Mahmoud Mestiri, arrived in the region with the renewed mandate of the General Assembly. In accordance with that mandate, he continued his efforts to facilitate national reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan, in particular by ensuring the transfer of power through the urgent establishment of a fully representative and broad-based authoritative council.

3. The Head of the Special Mission undertook an extensive round of consultations in pursuit of these objectives. This included meetings with President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Commander Ahmad Shah Masoud in Kabul; members of the Taliban Shura in Kandahar; the leader of the Harakat-i-Islami, Ayatollah Assef Mohseini, in Islamabad; the leader of the Ittehad-i-Islami, Mr. Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, in Jalalabad; the leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA), Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani, in Islamabad; the Governor of Nangarhar Province and head of the three-province Eastern Zone Shura, Hajji Abdul Qadir, in Jalalabad; the Head of the Hezb-i-Islami, Eng. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, in Jalalabad; the Chairman of the National Islamic

Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA), General Rashid Dostum, who was at that time on a visit to Islamabad; the leader of the Ismaili community in Afghanistan, Sayed Mansour Naderi; and other prominent Afghan personalities in Islamabad.

4. The Head of the Special Mission met in Pakistan with the Prime Minister, Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sardar Aseff Ahmad Ali, and other senior government officials, as well as with the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Allaeddin Boroujerdi, then on a visit to Islamabad. He also held meetings with officials of other interested Governments, mainly members of the diplomatic corps in Kabul and Islamabad.

III. DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE REPORTING PERIOD

A. Military situation

5. During the reporting period, Afghanistan remained under the military control of three major forces: those of the Government in Kabul and five other provinces in the north-eastern part of the country (Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Parwan and Kapisa); those of the Taliban in 14 provinces in the southern, south-eastern and south-western parts (Herat, Farah, Nimroz, Helmand, Kandahar, Ghor, Zabul, Oruzgan, Ghazni, Wardak, Paktika, Logar, Khost and parts of Badghis); and those of General Dostum in six provinces in the northern part (Jawzjan, Faryab, Samangan, Baghlan, Balkh and most of Badghis). The Hezb-i-Wahdat is confined to Bamyan and parts of Ghor, while the Eastern Zone Shura, under Governor Qadir, holds the three provinces of Laghman, Kunar and Nangarhar.

6. While most parts of Afghanistan were relatively calm, the tension around Kabul continued to be high. The capital remained under the siege of the Taliban, who reached the outskirts of the city last October. The forces of the Government and the Taliban militia were locked in a military stalemate, punctuated by occasional outbursts of fierce fighting which mostly afflicted the civilian population. Indiscriminate exchanges of rockets and missiles and aerial bombardment have been reported almost on a daily basis since February. Small-scale ground battles have also taken place near Charasyab, 25 kilometres south of Kabul, and on other frontlines.

7. The already tragic humanitarian situation was worsened by the blockade of Kabul by opposition forces, mainly Hezb-i-Islami commanders loyal to Mr. Hekmatyar, and by the unusually harsh winter. The blockade hindered the movement of essential supplies by the humanitarian agencies and forced the International Committee of the Red Cross to organize an emergency airlift of foodstuffs from Peshawar to Kabul. Although the blockade was subsequently relaxed and the roads to Kabul reopened, the situation in Kabul continues to be critical, especially as regards the supply and availability of food and fuel. Recent surveys show that large sections of the population that were not previously considered vulnerable now have extreme difficulties in meeting their basic needs.

8. Tension was also high in the Province of Herat which was taken by Taliban forces in September 1995 causing its Governor, Mr. Ismael Khan, to take refuge in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The situation in Herat has since become

increasingly volatile as Ismael Khan and Government forces are reported to be planning to regain control of the province by force. Another area of tension was Baghlan province, where fighting took place in early March 1996 between the forces loyal to the Ismaili leader, Sayed Mansour Naderi, and some commanders of Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami. While the conflict was quickly brought under control, the situation in the area remains tense.

9. The Head of the Special Mission made frequent appeals, public and private, to the warring parties for the immediate cessation of these hostilities and for unconditional recourse to a peaceful dialogue. Deeply concerned about the situation, I myself have reiterated these appeals, as did the Security Council in the statement made by its President on 14 February (S/PRST/1996/6). Unfortunately, our appeals have gone unheeded.

10. The principal reason for the continuing hostilities in Kabul is the uncompromising stance of the parties. The Taliban, for their part, remain determined to remove Mr. Rabbani from power by force. Equally determined has been the resolve of the Government to maintain its control of Kabul at all costs. Attempts to mediate a truce between them, which most Afghan leaders want, have yet to yield the desired results.

11. The most disturbing cause for concern is what appear to be active preparations by the Government and the Taliban for a major battle for the control of Kabul. The predictions were that this showdown might take place at the beginning of spring, which in Afghanistan usually brings a renewal of fighting. The Head of the Special Mission has been at pains to persuade the warring parties that the anticipated battle for Kabul would be a futile and reckless military exercise that would simply result in further deaths and destruction. Moreover, such a battle would produce no clear winner since any "victory" would be a pyrrhic one. These calls, too, have gone unheeded.

12. This unhealthy climate of war has considerably hindered the progress of the United Nations peace process, with the Special Mission often forced to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. Although the assault on Kabul has not yet taken place, there is strong evidence that military preparations are continuing.

B. Intra-Afghan peace talks

13. While the Government and the Taliban were preparing for more fighting, talks continued among Afghan leaders. Mr. Rabbani informed the Head of the Special Mission that he was in contact with General Dostum (with whom he has for six months maintained an undeclared cease-fire); with Mr. Hekmatyar (with whom he has been at violent loggerheads since June 1992); and with the "re-united" Hezb-i-Wahdat with which he signed a truce agreement recently. Mr. Rabbani has often stated to the Head of the Special Mission his willingness to transfer power - not to his enemies but either to an individual acceptable to the parties concerned or to an equitably representative mechanism. However, the Taliban and other parties opposed to the Government neither believe Mr. Rabbani nor trust his word. They insist that he first step down and evacuate his forces from Kabul as a precondition to a cease-fire and the start of negotiations.

14. The opposition parties have so far resisted formidable pressures on them to form a grand military alliance against Mr. Rabbani. General Dostum has maintained a neutral position, siding neither with Mr. Rabbani nor with the Taliban.

15. The leaders of the Supreme Coordination Council, comprising NIMA, Hezb-i-Wahdat, Hezb-i-Islami and the Afghan National Liberation Front (ANLF), gathered in Islamabad from 7 to 14 February 1996 to review their strategy. They reportedly discussed various options for solving the Afghan crisis, including the idea of forming a parallel government to Mr. Rabbani's, as well as the United Nations proposals for a cease-fire and the transfer of power by Mr. Rabbani as a result of peaceful negotiations. The Taliban delegation appeared briefly in Islamabad but boycotted the talks. In a meeting with the Head of the Special Mission on 10 February, General Dostum assured him that he was not in Islamabad to talk of war against Mr. Rabbani but to seek a peaceful way of resolving the political impasse. He pledged his continuing support for the United Nations peace mission in Afghanistan.

16. The consistent position of the Special Mission in regard to these intra-Afghan talks has been that of full support and encouragement, as it is recognized that they can complement the United Nations efforts.

C. Foreign interference in Afghanistan

17. Another major area of concern during the present round of consultations has been the rapid escalation of foreign interference in Afghanistan. This involvement, which is both military and political, is a massive obstacle to a peaceful settlement. Effective ways need to be developed soon for addressing this dimension of the Afghan problem.

18. I have instructed the Head of the Special Mission to continue to raise the matter with the countries concerned as well as the Afghan warring factions. It is my belief that the time has come for this problem to be taken up at the international level, as favoured by many Afghans. One proposal mentioned in this regard is the convening of an international conference to address the problem as an integral part of the overall Afghan question.

IV. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

19. The general assessment of the Special Mission at the end of the reporting period is that the military option still seems the course of action preferred by the main warring parties. The military race is on for the control of Kabul. Most of the parties do not seem genuinely ready to pursue a peaceful political settlement through the United Nations.

20. The escalating foreign interference by countries in the region and beyond, often in the form of active support of one faction or another, further complicates the peace process and fuels the machinery for war. But the countries concerned either categorically deny any involvement in Afghanistan or refer to it as legitimate assistance to the Afghan people.

21. The fact that the proposed transfer-of-power mechanism has not advanced significantly is almost entirely attributable to these two elements. Despite these difficulties, however, I remain convinced that the establishment of a fully representative and broad-based authoritative council, through a peaceful dialogue among the Afghans, is the most appropriate formula for opening the way towards a lasting settlement and peace in Afghanistan. At the same time, I believe that it is necessary to explore additional ways and means to facilitate the realization of that objective. In the coming months, this will be one of the principal tasks of the Special Mission, working in consultation with the Afghan parties and concerned Member States.